WASHINGTON POST

10 DEC 1974

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50C4-01.2 the ULTRA Secret

A Secret Not to Be Shared With the Russians

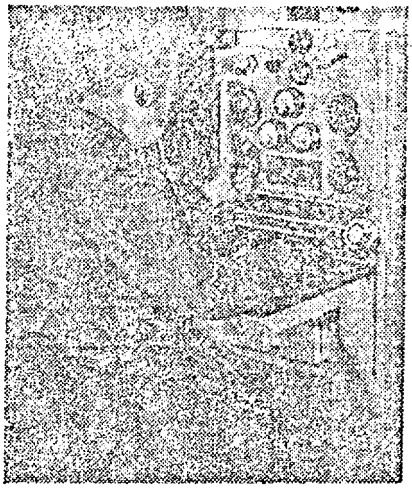
My old friends and colleagues, Chester Cooper and Daniel Davidson, have raised an interesting question in their article of Friday, November 29: Should the British (and Americans) have shared with the Russians the results and techniques of their breaking of high-level German codes during World War II? Unfortunately, their article only touches on an answer that should be reasonably plain to anyone who has read Group Captain Winterbotham's book revealing publicly, after nearly 30 years, what was accomplished in this area.

The point is only in small part the habit of all nations to protect their communications intelligence, a habit of which Messrs. Cooper and Davidson give good recent examples from the Vietnam war. In most cases where codes are broken or messages read, the secret becomes less important with time—which was why Secretary McNamara finally did testify in substance in February 1968 about the intercepted messages that helped to persuade him and others in the government, on August 4, 1964, that there had indeed been a second North Vietnamese attack on America ships at that time.

In the World War II case, there was no such dilution by time. The secret was, and had to remain, absolute—on it depended, not merely whether Allied forces got to Germany, but whether the invasion of Normandy itself came off. It is no exaggeration to say that if the "Ultra secret" had been compromised in any way, the chances of any Second Front whatever would have been small, not to mention the casualties that might have been incurred in a monster repetition of the Dieppe fiasco of 1942.

This was the risk that any thinking person would have seen at the time in a proposal to share with the Russians this precious secret. It could have been made reality by the capture of even one high-ranking Russian "in the know," by one misguided tip-off through acting unwisely on the basis of the intelligence, or—last but not least—by even general information that the Russians had embarked on a major new operation that, for any degree of success, must have embraced thousands of men and women all knowing little bits of the secret.

Group Captain Winterbotham describes in his book only a few of the security measures that the British took to protect the secret. He recounts the anguish felt over the fact that just one Frenchman "in the know" remained behind in occupied France; the ironclad rule that those in the know should incur no risk of capture; the



care with which the operational rules against any revealing use of the information had to be got across, usually through careful personal interviews, to all senior commanders and their staff; and the use of absolutely secure communications links manned by special personnel, to convey any of the fruits of the effort at any level.

And all this was only what might be called the operational side of the effort. Similar measures were in force throughout the widespread technical side of the operation. All told, something like 10,000 people—many more than Alfred Friendly has suggested in his earlier piece on the human side of the story — knew at least bits and pieces which in unfriendly hands might quickly have led to the fatal inference.

That all this was protected during the war was, as we minor participants saw it, something of a miracle in itself. The success owned much to the gradual way it was all built up, and—in hindsight—a great deal to the secure status of the whole of the British Isles not only physically but against enemy agents, as we now know from Professor Masterman's book revealing that the British successfully "doubled" every single German agent in Britain. It owed something, also, to British national habits of discretion, habits they were able (despite what must have been initial grave doubts) to impart to the carefully selected comparative handful of Americans who were brought in both on the operational and technical sides of the German operation. As Winterbotham truthfully (and without recrimination) relates, the parallel American operation in the Pacific involved one known leak (to The Chicago Tribune) and one operation that should have been a tip-off to the Japnese (the shooting down of Admiral Yamaoto). In short, even Britain's closest ally showed itself less than perfect.

Imagine, then, imparting the secret to a Russian government((a) operating in a fluctuating military situation that, at least up to mid-1943, involved the recurrent capture of top officers; (b) with a hinterland undoubtedly full of Germans agents and sympathizers (witness only the Vlasov forces organized from Russian dissidents); (c) that would on any realistic calculation have been totally unwilling to submit its security procedures to British review, still less to permit the kind of careful personal attention needed, and (d) that would surely have insisted on doing virtually the whole job of intercept and breaking itself, thus setting up a vast operation that would have pulled away from other tasks a high proportion of mathematicians and German linguists available. What chance of compromise would Messrs. Cooper and Davidson set under these conditions? What chance, indeed, that the Russians would be able to make effective use of the secret even in terms of their own military needs?

As a junior American officer engaged on the technical side only, I had no part in any discussions about whether there should be a sharing with the Russians. One heard rumors of minor nibbles back and forth, which as told seemed to indicate that the Russians were as stand-offish as the British, at least, in this whole area. But one does not have to judge the habits of discretion of Russians, in or out of the heat of a battle more intense than anything the Allies had to undergo, to see that the above factors, in some form, must have been decisive on the question.

In the circumstances of this war, Russia could not be totally secure. Objectively, to share the secret would have been an incredible gamble, with only a small chance of contributing to the common cause, ane every chance of destroying (not just impairing) a vital asset to Britain and the United States. And if this was, as I surmise, the emphatic judgment of all those senior officials who were in the big picture at the time and remotely professional in intelligence matters, to infer any political motives in the withholding seems to me an exercise of the imagination at which even the staunchest revisionist might hesitate.

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